



Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China

Zhang Huan; Ma Liuming; Qian Zhijian

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With this issue, *Art Journal* is pleased to inaugurate a three-part series of conversations on aspects of contemporary art by Chinese artists. Featuring leading artists and scholars, each conversation is devoted to a specific theme. In this, the first conversation, the art historian Qian Zhijian interviews Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan, two of the most prominent performance artists from mainland China. In the second conversation, to be published in the Fall 1999 issue, the artists Wenda Gu, Simon Leung, and Xu Bing and the scholar Jonathan Hay discuss writing, language, and calligraphy in contemporary Chinese art. In the third conversation, a group of artists living and working in Beijing discuss site-specific interventions by artists into the urban fabric of that city, which in the last decade has experienced transformations on the scale of Haussmann's Paris. As the work of contemporary Chinese artists acquires a more visible profile in the international arena, we seek to provide readers with a deeper understanding of its formal, social, cultural, political, and philosophical complexities.

Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China

Zhang Huan

In 1993, Zhang Huan (b. 1965, Anyang, Henan Province) and Ma Liuming (b. 1969, Huangshi, Hubei Province) presented their performances for the first time in Beijing. They are among the first few artists in China to take performance art as their medium after the June 4th Incident of 1989, but they have not had the opportunity to show their work in public spaces in that country up to this day. In 1996, they began to draw international attention and to show their work abroad.

Born in the late 1960s, they have only vague memories of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). They attended college in the second half of the 1980s, when China began to become more open to the rest of the world. Like most artists of their generation, Zhang and Ma were deeply influenced by translations of modern Western art history and the new art experiments by Chinese artists in the 1980s. When the June 4th Incident occurred, Zhang was a college teacher of art in Henan, in middle China, and Ma was still an art student in Hubei, also in middle China.

Zhang first went to Beijing in 1991, to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Ma moved there in 1993, after two years of teaching at a college in Hubei. They met each other after Zhang had his first performance at a group painting show that was canceled after the opening because of the performance. Later that year, because of personal economic difficulties, they had to move, together with a small group of avant-garde artists, to a village in the eastern suburbs of Beijing. In October 1993, the British artists Gilbert & George, who were the subject of an exhibition in Beijing, visited this small group of artists in their studios. The visit highly encouraged the young artists, who were then not very clear in their artistic direction. Zhang and Ma collaborated in a few performances before they began to concentrate on their own work in 1996.

Qian: You are one of the first few artists who began to use performance as the medium of your art after 1989. When and where was your first performance?

Zhang: My first performance in a public space was in October 1993, when I participated in a group exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. Before that, I had done several pieces in my studio but never had the opportunity for a public show. This performance was somewhat accidental, however, because I originally intended to present an installation in what was mainly a painting show. Most of the artists included were graduates from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Unfortunately, just two days before the opening, we were told that installation and performance wouldn't be allowed in the gallery, an official institution that does not permit these mediums to this day. But the whole exhibition had been well prepared, and I didn't want to give up. So I decided to replace my installation with a performance.

Right before the opening, I began the performance outside the gallery. First, I spread a sheet of white cloth on the ground and removed from a large bag a jar

Conversation



5. Zhang Huan. *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995. C-print. 26 x 40 (66 x 101.6). Performance. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

filled with bloody red color and fragments of toy babies. I then took off my clothes, lifted the jar above my head, and suddenly dropped it onto the ground. I picked up the bodies, heads, and limbs of the toy babies and made a totally new whole (fig. 1). I took my toy baby, which I called *The Angel*, and went into the gallery, where I hung it on the wall, in the place where my installation was supposed to be.

Very unfortunately, the gallery immediately decided to cancel the exhibition. They had me write a self-criticism and pay a fine of 2,000 RMB for my “misdeed,” promising that they wouldn’t send me to the police and that the exhibition would be reopened if this would be done. I did what they said only for the sake of the show. But it was never opened. Many blamed me for that event and insisted that I was fully responsible for the cancellation of the show. I didn’t know what to say. Negative comments were also heard in art circles. The small art newspaper *Art News* in Beijing published a short account of the event. That was the first time that my name and “Beijing East Village,” a place where a small number of avant-garde artists lived, became known to the public.

Qian: What were the negative comments? Did they put pressure on you, since it was your first performance in a public space? Did you ever doubt your pursuit of performance art because of these reactions?

Zhang: The most negative comments came from my teachers and colleagues from the art school where I used to study. None of the art schools in China, as you know, regularly teach installation or performance art. By that time, only a few artists were experimenting with installation. No one was doing performance art, and there was little knowledge about it. They responded pretty sarcastically to my performance at the gallery. They said that the only thing I knew how to do was to strip off my clothes because I didn’t know how to paint. Others said that I was simply out of my mind and a complete pervert. Interestingly, a short report published in a journal in Hong Kong connected *The Angel* to the situation of population in China and even to the problem of compulsory abortion. That was very unexpected, and the connection was very much politicized. All of these comments caused a lot of pressure, but I wasn’t too concerned. I didn’t doubt my pursuit of performance art, though I wasn’t well informed about it. What was fortunate was that I had friends who understood and supported me. The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who had lived in New York for quite a long time, encouraged me when he saw the photographs of the performance. Although I have never had the opportunity to present another public performance in China to this day, I have not given up, except for a very short time when I had to stop working on my art because of a personal economic crisis. I believe that my pursuit of performance as my primary medium is right.

Qian: Your performances have been given in private or “underground” spaces.

Zhang: Except for those outside China.

Qian: You have been trained as a painter. What made you give up painting and take performance as your medium?



I. Zhang Huan. *Angel*, No. 2, 1993. C-print. 23½ x 35½ (60 x 90.2). Performance in front of National Gallery of Art, Beijing. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

Zhang: I didn't know very much about what performance art was until the early 1990s. My knowledge was gained mainly from overseas exhibition catalogues that I saw at friends' studios or from conversations with friends who had opportunities to go abroad. Besides this, the translation of the book *Conversations with Experimental Artists* in the early 1990s had deeply influenced me.

My decision to do performance art is directly related to my personal experience. I have always had troubles in my life. And these troubles often ended up in physical conflicts. I often found myself in conflict with my circumstances and felt that the world around me seemed to be intolerant of my existence. I used to have my head shaved, only leaving a small and short bunch of hair in the back. In the summer, I liked to wear a black vest, black boots, and sunglasses. But I found that, with my dress style, I was never welcomed by others. Sometimes in a bar, somebody would come up to me and shout "Get out!" for no apparent reason. Sometimes when I would walk by myself along the street at night, I would suddenly be attacked from behind by strangers.

All of these troubles happened to my body. This frequent body contact made me realize the very fact that the body is the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me. The body is the proof of identity. The body is language. My consciousness of the body as such became so strong that it became a pressure I couldn't get rid of. I wanted to grasp this consciousness and get rid of the pressure in my painting, but I found

that painting for me lacked the possibility of expressing the directness that I felt through contact with the body. Furthermore, painting could not make me feel the existence of my body in my work. I realized that any medium beyond my body seemed too remote from myself. Thus, I decided that the only way I could be an artist was by using my body as the basic medium and language of my art.

Qian: Do you mean that you wanted to express and make clear the existence and inescapability of external pressures by means of the body?

Zhang: Right. But for me, these pressures are not just inescapable. They go further to form an extremely unbearable fear and panic. I often had the fantasy that somebody would break into my room at night when I was sleeping and cut off my ears. This strong anxiety caused even greater pressure on me. When one is driven by such unnamable pressures to the edge of real madness, I kept saying to myself, the best way to get rid of the horror and to return to a state of ease might be to torture the body itself to calm it.

Qian: The conflict between the body and its surrounding conditions is often expressed in a radical way, which has the color of self-torturing. Is this conflict and tendency of self-torturing a personal issue, or is it a social one in the context of contemporary China?

Zhang: I often ask myself such questions. I think first it has something to do with my personal experience. Quite often I have felt absolutely helpless when facing troubles in my life. In 1993, I worked for a month at a commercial painting company in Beijing. My job was to make copies of Degas's work from high-quality reproductions. Every day, I spent two or three hours commuting to and from work on the bus. My copies were very good and made a lot of money for the company. But I received a salary of only 250 RMB, less than my expenses for a week. I asked my boss for a raise, but he refused me very rudely, yelling that my copies were not good at all. I was furious but totally at a loss as to what to do. What I did was to punch at the bus on my way home, since I felt better when I was tired. But the other passengers stared at me as if I were crazy. Later that year, I went to Guangzhou, a southern Chinese city, and tried to earn enough money to do a private show. But business wasn't easy for me. I was often cheated. You can't find solutions to such problems in a society that lacks laws. Sometimes I became involved in fights with those who cheated me. I could feel better only after these fights, when the pressure seemed to be released. But these acts are acts of self-torturing. I tend to express this sense of self-torturing to an extreme because I want to make the feeling more strong and real. Each time I finish a performance, I feel a great sense of release of fear.

However, the tendency of self-torturing is not just a personal problem. It is a common phenomenon, especially so in the present circumstances of China today. In the suburban area of Beijing where we live, there also live thousands of peasants who come from all over the country to make a living selling vegetables. Every morning they have to get up at four o'clock for their work. I believe they wish they could have more time for sleep, like the rest of us. But they can't. If one has to do something one doesn't want to do, that is a kind of self-torturing. Everybody has this tendency. Some are conscious of it, while others don't want to admit it.

Qian: Besides an emphasis on the experience of personal existence, you seem to pay much attention to the relationship between the body and the specific environment.

Zhang: That's basically true for my work before 1995. In those works, I wanted to feel and experience the existence of the body under the pressures of different environments. In some of my works after 1995, I try to make this experience happen in a group of people, which often involves the collaboration of other artists and ordinary audience members.

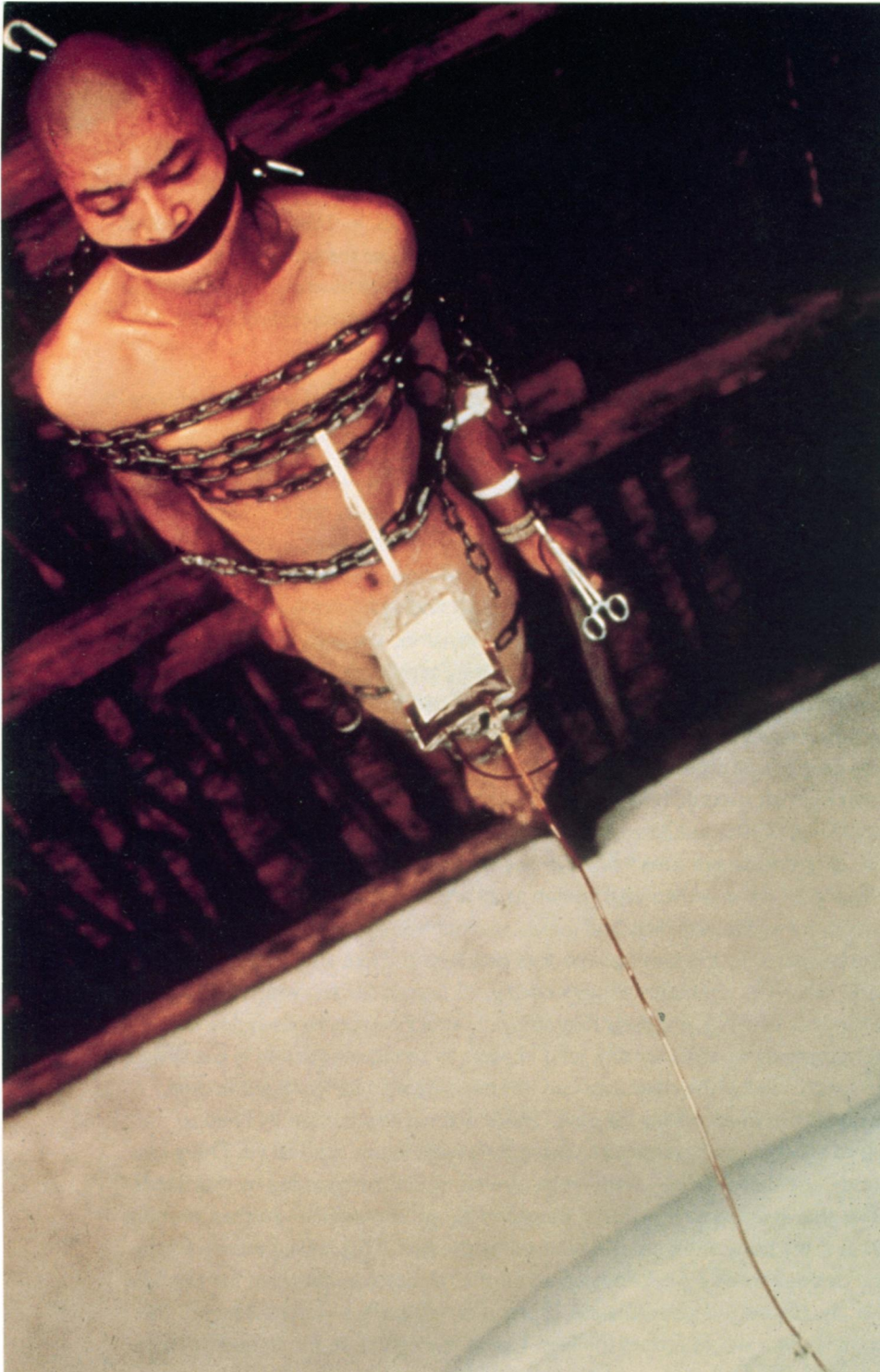
Qian: In your earlier works, you seem to deliberately create an extraordinary environmental space for the presence of the body.

Zhang: Again it's related to my experiences in life. Like many artists of my generation, when I graduated from art school in 1993, I could not find a job and therefore had no regular salary and place to live. I had to rent a peasant's old house in the suburbs, which I shared with a few close friends. But it was in an out-of-the-way area, and friends often got lost finding it whenever we had private shows in an underground space. I thus renamed the area by changing the street sign from "Dashan Village" into "Beijing East Village," mainly for the convenience of helping friends find the location of our house. But there were also two other reasons. First, I knew of the East Village in New York, where artists from many places around the world live. It was a common wish shared among us that our place would become a similar place where many excellent artists from all over China would come to live. The second reason was that we wanted to differentiate our area from another artists' village in the western suburbs of Beijing, which was then well known as an area for commercial painters.

But our village was dirty and messy, surrounded by hills of garbage from the urban area. To the west tall modern buildings and five-star hotels could be clearly seen. The contrast was very strong. *12 Square Meters*, which I realized in the summer of 1994, is closely related to my specific experience in this village. It was noontime one summer day, when I went to a public restroom in the village after lunch. I found the restroom had not been cleaned for quite some time because it had been raining for days. There was no way to step in. I had to walk to another public restroom where the village heads used to go. There was nobody else there. Once I stepped in, I found myself surrounded by thousands of flies that seemed to have been disturbed by my appearance. At that moment I felt as if my body were being devoured by the flies. That feeling was so strong that I decided to do a performance about the relationship between the flies and my body. Before the performance, I spread on my body a visceral liquid of fish and honey that would attract the flies. I sat in the restroom for an hour, almost motionless. My body became covered with flies.

Qian: It's hard to imagine that you could have sat there for so long. How did you feel during the whole process?

Zhang: I just felt that everything began to vanish from my sight. Life seemed to be leaving me far in the distance. I had no concrete thought except that my mind was completely empty. I could only feel my body, more and more flies landing and crawling over my nose, eyes, lips, ears, forehead, every part of me.



2. Zhang Huan. 65 kg, 1994. Performance, one-hour body experiment. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

I could feel them eating the liquid on my body. Some were stuck but did not stop eating. I could even tell that they were more interested in the fish liquid than the honey because there were more flies on the left part of my body, where that liquid was. The very concept of life was then for me the simple experience of the body.

There was no audience other than nearly a dozen artists who lived in the village and my friends, who helped to take photos and video. The only uninvited viewer was a villager who came to use the restroom. He appeared to be intimidated by what he saw. He got scared and ran away. Minutes later, a village head came and asked what was going on. My friends told him that we were making an advertisement for honey. He looked quite suspicious and left murmuring "Vicious."

Qian: Are all your works related to your life experience?

Zhang: Most are, in one way or another. The title *65 kg* (fig. 2) refers to my weight or, more precisely, to the actions of a body with this weight conducted in specific environmental conditions. The room in the old and dilapidated house where I lived served as both the living room and my studio. Besides a small bed in the corner, it was filled with various things I had collected for my installation projects. The room was dimly lit by a small lamp clamped on the bed. One night when I came back very late and turned on the light, I found that the light cast the

shadow of everything up onto the ceiling. All of a sudden, an idea came to my mind. I said to myself, "I have been sleeping on this small bed for too long. Why couldn't I sleep right under the roof?" I was really excited by that idea and started to work it out. At first, I wanted to do the performance in collaboration with a female artist, but I couldn't find one. So I asked my assistants to tie my naked body with a thick iron chain and to hang me from the roof beam. A doctor was there helping to transfer 250cc of blood through a plastic pipe from my body

down into a pan on an electric stove. The floor was covered with two layers of white quilts of the type found in hospitals. The small room slowly filled with the increasingly pungent smell of my blood and sweat burning in the pan.

Qian: It seems that you intended to force the audience to be aware of and accept the cruelty of reality as witnessed in your performance.

Zhang: You might say so. But my understanding is that no one can escape this cruelty, neither myself nor the audience. Once the audience members step into the site of the performance and onto the quilt, they become involved in the reality before their eyes. They have nowhere to escape, just as they have no way to escape reality. The smell of the blood was a reminder that further stimulated and reinforced their realization of the truthfulness of the cruelty they were witnessing. When I looked down onto the audience from where I was hung, I felt as if they were just as bound as I was. They, too, had nowhere to escape. However scared they were, they couldn't leave. They seemed paralyzed by the fear and by their stronger desire to look. Some of them even fainted when they saw the blood. But they didn't leave. Some peasants from the neighborhood stood watching behind the windows. I am sure they were really scared. But at the same time they seemed to be eager to know what was going on inside.

Qian: Besides your emphasis on specially designated circumstances, you also pay much attention to the selection of specific objects and sometimes animals for your work. What is this selection based on?

Zhang: The essential criterion is the physical feeling of the contact between the objects or animals and my body. Those objects or animals are things that people are reluctant to touch in their ordinary life. In the group activity *The Original Sound*, which I co-organized in January 1995, I used earthworms. Before that I tried other animals, including spiders and insects that I raised in my room and enjoyed looking at. But winter is freezing cold in Beijing. Spiders and insects do not move in the winter. They just stay where they are. Only earthworms could move out of the bottle that I used during the performance.

At around one o'clock in the morning, I stripped off my clothes and lay naked on the concrete ground under a highway bridge. There was no audience, with the exception of twelve artists participating in the activity and one or two passersby returning home on bicycle. I poured the worms out of a bottle into my mouth. They began to crawl out from my mouth and move onto every part of my body. I liked the feeling of the worms creeping into my mouth and ears and onto my face and body. I felt as if I were one of them. I think man and earthworm are similar creatures in the way that they are related to the earth. They come out of the earth, but eventually they all go back into it.

Qian: You seem to be fascinated with the physical feeling of your body in different environmental conditions. And you often put your body into situations of adventure.

Zhang: Adventure is what makes me feel and realize the true existence of my body. A good example is my performance *25mm Threading Steel* of 1995 (fig. 3), which took place in a construction site on the third underground level of a skyscraper in Beijing. At first the construction workers did not agree to let me lie in

front of their working table because they were afraid that the grinding wheel would cut my body into pieces if an accident occurred. I promised them I would be fully responsible for anything that went wrong. I put my promise in writing and gave them some money. They agreed, though quite reluctantly. I lay there for an hour while the workers ground steel tubes. I felt some pain when sparks flew onto my body, but very soon I felt no pain at all because the sparks began to numb my skin.

Qian: I would like you to talk a little more in detail about how you feel at those moments, physically and spiritually.

Zhang: Many people ask me similar questions, in Japan, France, Germany, and now in New York. In Japan, they asked me what kind of *gong fu* I had been practicing. Some even asked me if I had been practicing sitting in meditation, which is the essential practice in Chan or Zen Buddhism. I have never practiced any kind of *gong fu*, but I do like Chan music and its lifestyle. I prefer to put my body in physical conditions that ordinary people have not experienced. It is only in such conditions that I am able to experience the relationship between the body and the spirit. In performance, I try to let my mind leave my body and forget the surrounding conditions. At that moment, I cannot feel any pain. Yet, the mind cannot really leave the body. Instead, it keeps going back to the body. And when the mind returns to the body, there comes an ever stronger feeling of the body's real situation. It makes you more conscious of the cruelty of the reality and makes you feel more uncomfortable. But it is not the physical pain in the physical body, but rather the spiritual uneasiness. The shift between the mind and the body is what I prefer to experience. In the process of performance, I sometimes have a strong sense of hallucination. Once when I was giving a performance sitting among the legs of dancers in a bar in Beijing, friends moved me onto a chair. And they kept talking to me. But I was not aware of anything that had happened until they told me about it after the performance. In my performance of *New York Fengshui* at P.S.1, I felt as if I had clearly heard my wife calling my name loudly. But she later told me that she hadn't.

Qian: Are you saying that the spirit and the body are separated or depart from each other at those moments?

Zhang: I think so, but probably just for a short while. What I'm saying is that I try to experience the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual body in particularly designated circumstances. I want to make this experience clearer and deeper in some radical situations. Not just for the sake of testing the endurance of my physical body under external pressure, but rather through this process of endurance a deeper panic in the spirit might be released, though perhaps just temporarily.

Qian: Do you mean that, for you, the existence of the body and the spirit could be testified only when they are located in a specific environment?

Zhang: You might say so. I based the performance *3006 Cubic Meters* : 65 kg at the Watari Museum in Tokyo in 1997 mainly on this assumption. The conflict between the body and the external environment is the way to prove the existence of the self. In the performance I tried hard to pull down the museum by a

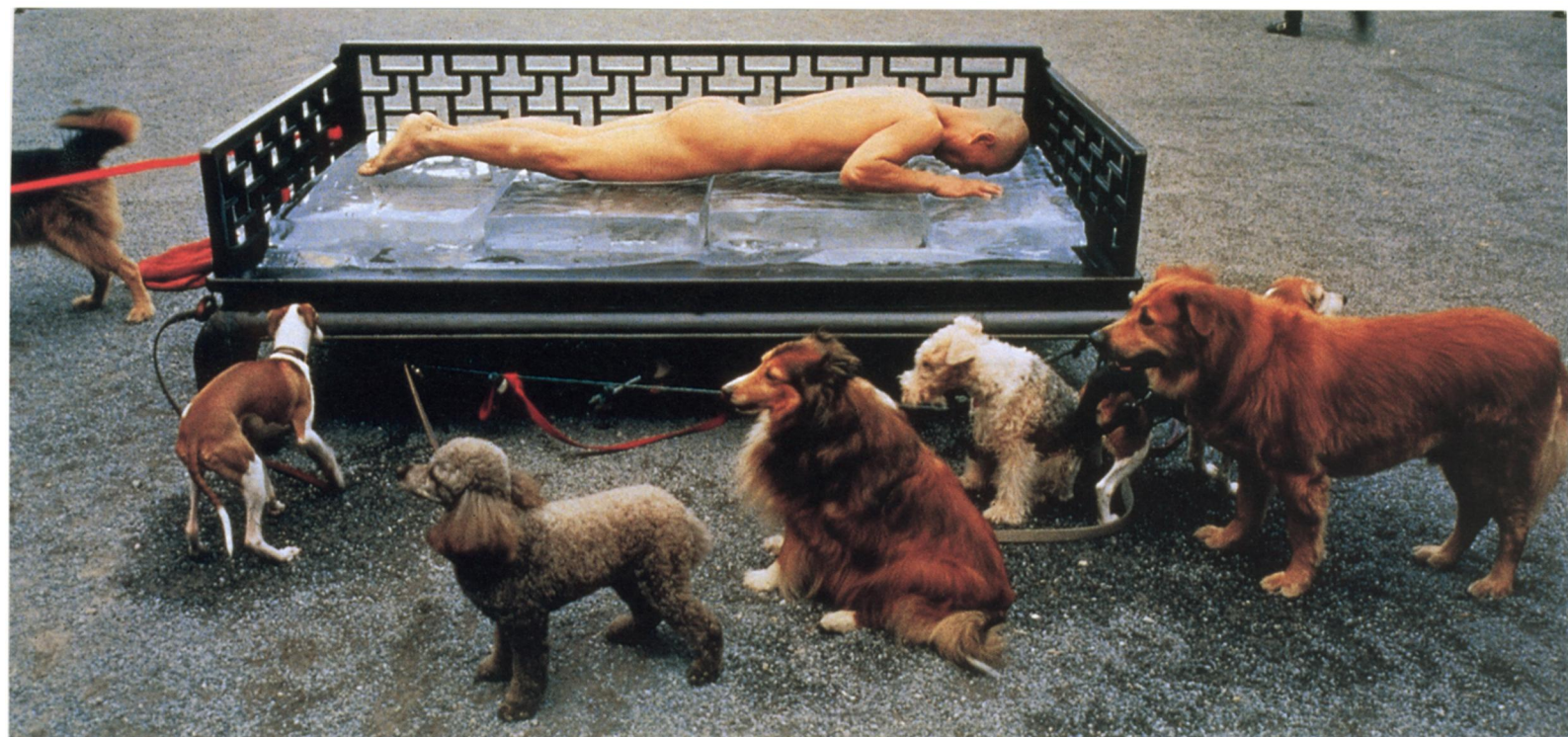


3. Zhang Huan. 25mm
***Threading Steel*, 1995.**
C-print. 27 x 40 (68.6 x
228.6). Performance.
Courtesy Max Protetch
Gallery, New York.

number of ropes that were fastened to many parts of the exterior wall of the museum. But the harder I tried to pull it down, the more I felt that my body was being pulled down by the museum. What I felt at that moment was how insignificant the body can be when it is inevitably conquered by something beyond itself. Resistance against any monstrous power would only result in a stronger consciousness of the powerless body. But the significance does not lie in the result but in the very act of resistance itself.

Qian: Are you trying to say that such an experience of the relationship between the body and the spirit could be intensified only when the body in its full nakedness comes in direct contact with the external world?

Zhang: Right. Nudity is absolutely necessary in my performance. Only in its full nakedness can the body be truly felt and its relationship with the spirit be identified through its direct contact with the object. In *New York Fengshui* (fig. 4), for example, only in nudity can I feel the relationship between ice and my body. The contact of such objects or animals as iron chains, ice, sparks, flies, and earthworms with my naked body makes me feel my body more strongly and helps me to develop a deeper understanding of the body. Moreover, it reinforces my personal perception of the surrounding environment.



4. Zhang Huan. *New York Fengshui*, 1998.
C-print. 19¼ x 40 (50.2 x 101.6). Performance,
P.S. 1, Long Island City,
New York. Courtesy
Max Protetch Gallery,
New York.

Qian: Does nudity in your work have anything to do with sexuality, privacy, and morality?

Zhang: It's often the case in China that nudity is easily associated with those issues. But in my case, I do not think about such issues.

Qian: To Western audiences, your work may appear to have political meanings. Do you think such meanings are an aspect of your work?

Zhang: I cannot restrict audiences to certain interpretations, though I don't like to look at things simply from a political angle. Perhaps it is because the problems in China are so complicated that people want to find answers for themselves from different angles. In China, many people say that I am crazy, perverted, and a self-torturer. That's their point of view. For me, the question is how I can make good art.

Qian: Before we finish, I'd like you to talk more about *New York Fengshui*, presented at P.S. 1 for *Inside-Out*.

Zhang: As I said earlier, since 1995, I have done several performances in which I invited others to participate. They can be professional artists or just ordinary people. In *The Original Sound, To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (fig. 5), and *Nine Holes*, professional artists were invited. In *Raising the Level of a Fish Pond* of 1997, I invited peasant-workers who had come to Beijing from all over China. As I said before, the conflict between the body and the environment is expressed in a radical form in my work. But such a conflict is not necessarily an entirely personal problem. I believe it's a common phenomenon. It's based on this idea that I invite other people to participate in the creation of my work.

The piece at P.S. 1 was originally based on a similar idea. But the final performance was somewhat different from the original project. Besides the bed and ice, I had planned to create at the show site an environment in the Chinese

landscape style. In the project, there were to be hills of grass, a stream, a fountain, and pine trees. I had intended for the audience to enter the work and talk to me. But the project had to be changed because of budgetary limitations. The use of dogs originates from my impression of New York. There are so many dogs in this city, and they are very well taken care of. But like human beings, dogs are sensitive to the external environment and are afraid of possible dangers. What strikes me the most about this city is the co-existence of different races and their cultures. By the term *fengshui*, I am referring to the vitality and vigor of this metropolis characterized by the co-existence of cultures. Yet for me, there is a fear, or culture shock, if you like. I do like the city, but at the same time I have an unnamable fear. I want to feel it with my body, just as I feel the ice. I try to melt off a reality in the way I try to melt off the ice with the warmth of my body.

—November 4, 1998

Ma Liuming

Qian: In recent years, you have presented performances in a few countries outside of China. What is your general impression of the reactions of audiences from different social and cultural backgrounds?

Ma: My first performance abroad was in Japan in 1996, when I participated in NIPAF '96 in Tokyo. The second was a solo show at the Chinese Contemporary Gallery in London in the same year. In 1997, I gave a performance for the exhibition *De-genderism* at the Setagaya Art Museum, also in Tokyo. Then there was *Another Long March* in Breda, Holland. Later that year, I had several performances in Quebec, Toronto, and Trois-Rivières in Canada. Photographs and videos of my performances have also been shown in other cities in Japan, New Zealand, and here in New York. But the performance for *Inside-Out: New Chinese Art* at P.S.1 is my first in New York.

My audiences are very much engaged in my performances in one way or another. But there are some differences between audiences in different countries. In Japan, they are very quiet. They just stand there watching. But in New York, they are ready to join me. They step forward and pose beside me without hesitation when I take pictures with a remote control. A few of them even take off their clothes and stand or sit as naked as I am. In Europe, audiences actively participate in my performances, too (fig. 6).

Qian: Is there any difference between the activity of European and American audiences?

Ma: Yes. What strikes me about audiences in New York is that they jump into my work quite spontaneously. There seems to be no shyness when they strip off their clothes and pose. In Europe, audiences seem to be more reserved at the beginning, and they just stand watching at a distance. But later on, they become more relaxed and join me in groups of two or three.

Qian: How do audiences in China react to your performances?

Ma: There is a big difference in reaction between Chinese audiences and foreign ones in general. Whenever I perform in China, audiences seem to stand as

outsiders. They simply stand there watching. No one is brave enough to take off his or her clothes. My impression of foreign audiences is that they always seem to be thinking of how and when they should enter my work.

Qian: Do you think this has something to do with the composition of the audience? There are a large number of artists and art professionals in audiences in countries outside China, especially in New York.

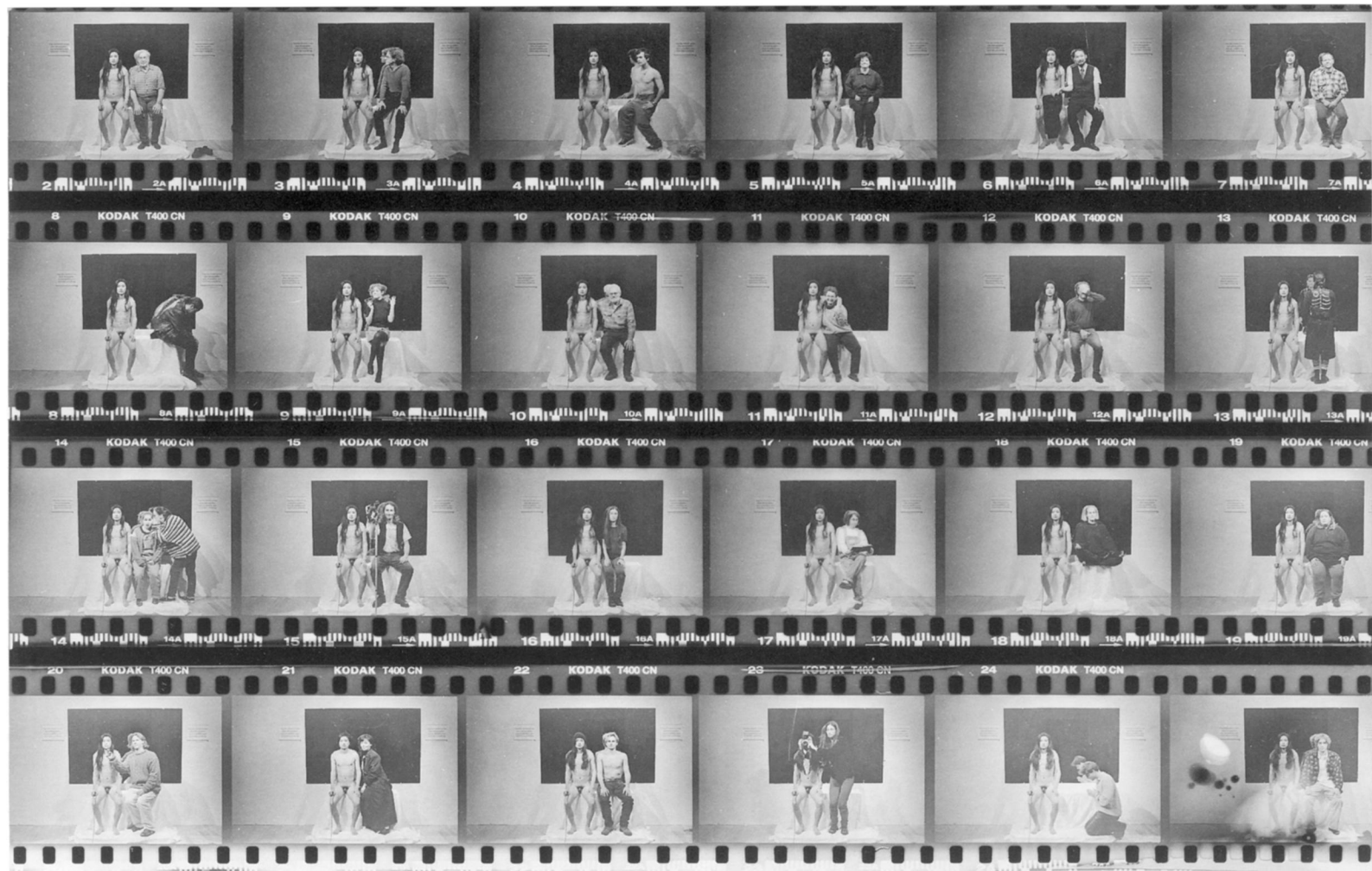
Ma: Many audience members in China are artists or critics, too, and most of them are young people. They have the nerve to see avant-garde art in non-public spaces that could easily result in trouble, especially back in the early 1990s. But Chinese audiences seem to have limited knowledge about contemporary art—performance art in particular—while Western audiences are more knowledgeable.

Qian: That's true. I remember that when you and a small group of artists started doing performance art in private apartments in Beijing in 1993, the regular audience was at most three dozen people. There was no published writing or discussion about performance art at that time, and no encouragement in any form. What impressed me the most about you and other artists was not only your courage to face potential trouble, but also the price you paid for doing your art. You were even arrested in 1994 for a private performance. What made you decide to make performance your main medium of art, until this day?

Ma: That's a long story. My decision to do performance art is closely related to my own experience. When I was still a college student of oil painting at Hubei Academy of Fine Arts in middle China, I had a chance to be the performer in a performance work of my teacher Wei Guangqing, who then was very active in the "1985 New Trend" art movement. That was in 1988. He invited me to play the "suicide" in his *Suicide Series*. I was wrapped tight in white bandages from head to toe and lay on my back in the open air on the ground spread with bloody red color. That was the very first time that I got some idea about what performance art was. Later on, before my graduation in 1991, I tried a few performances of my own in my studio, but I never showed in public.

The real origin of my performance art was in the summer of 1993, when the British artists Gilbert & George came to visit a small group of avant-garde artists during their big show at the Beijing National Art Gallery. I was part of this small group. All of us were from other cities far from Beijing. We had just settled down in a nearby suburb, which we had renamed "Beijing East Village." We met Gilbert & George in our studios. We showed them our paintings but didn't talk much because of the language problem. I did a performance for them entitled *A Dialogue with Gilbert & George*. I felt like a long-pending desire for performance art was triggered by their visit, as I knew that they, too, did performance art, such as their *Singing Sculpture*, when they were young. That work is to some degree an improvisation. But it was a turning point in my career.

Qian: When you made this decision, were you ever aware of the problems and troubles you would encounter, since this kind of art is never welcomed by governments with extensive powers of censorship?

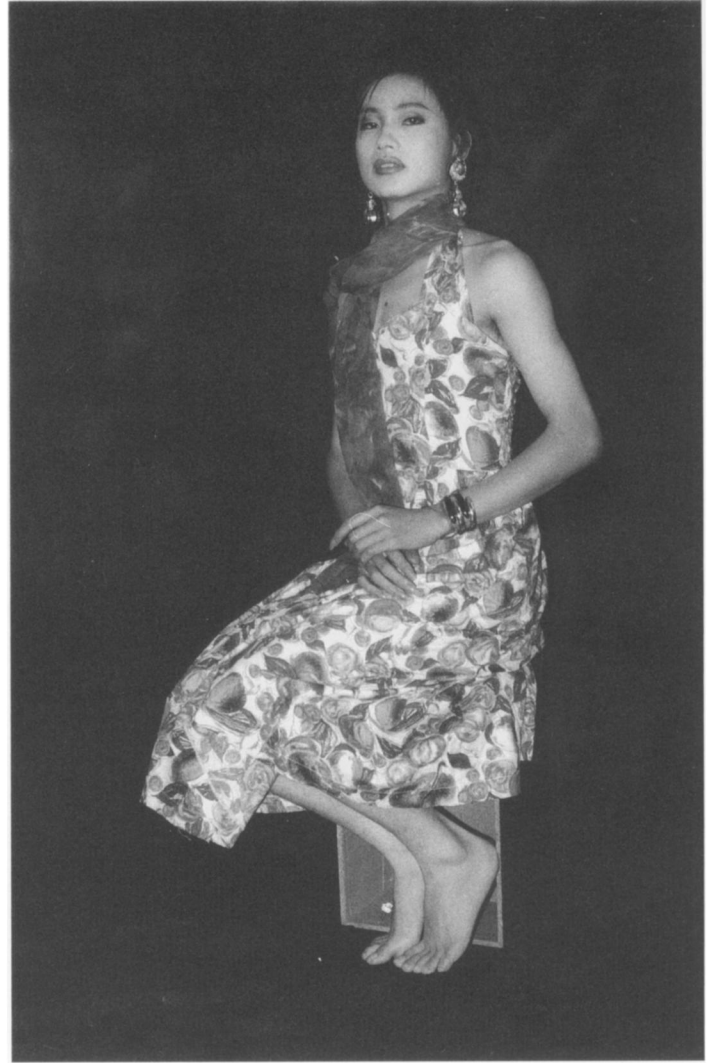
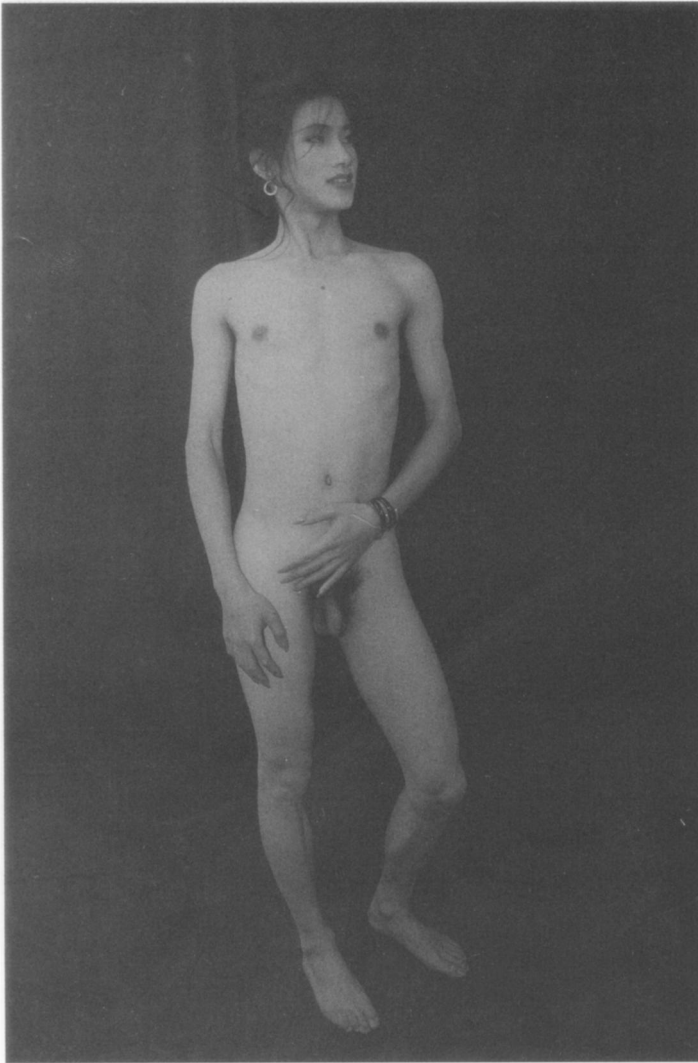


6. Ma Liuming. *Fen Ma Liuming in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, 1997.*
Performance. Courtesy the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

Ma: I didn't think too much about this question, although I knew quite clearly that my art might be troubling in the eyes of certain people. What I thought, and still am thinking, about is how I could find the best way to put forward the question of the distinction between male and female, which has long puzzled me. In China, even today, people are used to distinguishing man from woman by hair length and dress. Ever since childhood, I have regularly been asked such questions as "Are you a boy or girl?" and later "Are you a man or woman?" simply because of my appearance. Even friends would come to me and say that I look like a woman.

This aroused in me such questions as, What is the real border between man and woman? What makes a man a man and a woman a woman, after all? Why do people in China tend to make visual distinctions between man and woman? I said to myself, Since ordinary people as well as friends believe that I have the appearance of a female, why not use my own image and all its characteristics to make my artwork? Thus, I invited a professional dresser to highlight these characteristics of my body before my performance *Fen Ma Liuming I* in 1993. This may sound like an accidental decision, but for me it is a process of knowing and identifying myself.

Qian: You title your works the *Fen Ma Liuming* series (fig. 7). When the title is written in Chinese, with a separating dot between "Fen" and your name, it



7. Ma Liuming. *Fen Ma Liuming I*, 1993.
Performance, Beijing.
 Courtesy the artist and
 Jack Tilton Gallery, New
 York. Photo Xu Zhiwei.

reads like a Western name. Is there any specific meaning in this title?

Ma: Yes. As you know, the character “Fen” in Chinese means fragrance and is most often seen in feminine names. My name is very masculine. By putting them side by side, I mean to point to the same question of sexual ambiguity and indistinguishableness as in my performance. But “Fen” is homophonic with “fen” in Chinese, which means “separation.” Another interpretation is added here—distinction within ambiguity and vice versa. That the title may sound like a Western name in the Chinese context or a Chinese name in the Western context has a similar implication by the same token. What I want to imply is that this figure can be Ma Liuming myself, but at the same time he/she is just the performer and also an outsider participant, just like any participant from the audience. He/she is Ma Liuming, but not the pure and complete one. He/she is the Chinese Ma Liuming, but at the same time not necessarily so.

Qian: So the issue of sexual ambiguity is the starting point of your work?

Ma: Right. But more than that. It is the main theme of my work. For me, it's also a historical and universal issue. I make the performance happen first in inside space, then in outside space, as in *Fen Ma Liuming's Lunch II* of 1994 (fig. 8), and later in historical environments, as in *Fen Ma Liuming Walking the Great Wall* in the summer of 1998 (fig. 9). I also want the performance to happen in an environment of the future, if I can. I believe that sexual ambiguity is an issue that transcends space and time.

Qian: In your earlier performances you include actions and objects that seem to be closely related to daily life. Besides the main theme of sexual ambiguity, does your work refer to any other social or political issues in the reality of China? If so, why are these issues much reduced in your more recent works?

Ma: In the first work in the *Lunch* series, I took a fish out of a fish jar and cooked it in the traditional Chinese way. When the fish was ready, I put it on a glass table. I then sat still behind the table, with a plastic pipe connecting my mouth and my penis. Interestingly, unexpectedly, the audience came up to the table and started to eat the fish. Then I put the fishbone back into the fish jar. In the second piece, I put in one cooking pot such objects as potatoes, sheets of paper with drawings of potatoes, the pen that I used to draw the potatoes, and my watch and jewelry. After the cooking, I buried the cooked potatoes in the backyard of my studio.

It is true that these objects are from daily life. But my point is not the objects themselves. The fish goes back into the fish jar, the potatoes back into the earth, and the plastic pipe that supposedly carries the breath from the mouth to the penis is meant to evoke the idea of cyclicity, or more precisely the impossibility of this cycle. That's the most absurd part of the work. But it is this very absurdity that is related to the absurdity of life in the reality of China.

Qian: How could one make reasonable associations between the absurd actions and your nudity? Why is nudity necessary for the actions?

Ma: The fundamental and central point of my performances is the very image and persona of Fen Ma Liuming. He/she is special and always naked. He/she has his/her own life, just as everyone of us has. He/she cooked the lunch but never ate it. It is absurd in the eyes of the audience. But that's his/her true life. The absurdity is just like that of my being arrested by the police and put in jail for two months because of the performance.

Qian: Why did they arrest you?

Ma: They said that I was doing a porn show.

Qian: Why did they release you?

Ma: I don't know. I believe they didn't know either. They simply said, "You may go." This is also part of the absurd, but true, story of Fen Ma Liuming.

Qian: In 1994, there were quite a few such avant-garde art activities. And there was a lot of exposure of these activities in the overseas press. I assume that the government was alert to the situation but reluctant to prohibit it by political means for the sake of showing their "political tolerance" to the

world. So they chose to intervene in art activities by means of, or rather in the name of, the law. But this restraint on art and culture proved to be ineffective because artists are no longer threatened by their warnings, and the government itself is more scrupulous about critical views from outside China.

Ma: You're right. My friends showed me many reports about my being arrested after I was released.

Qian: Did this event affect you in your later performances?

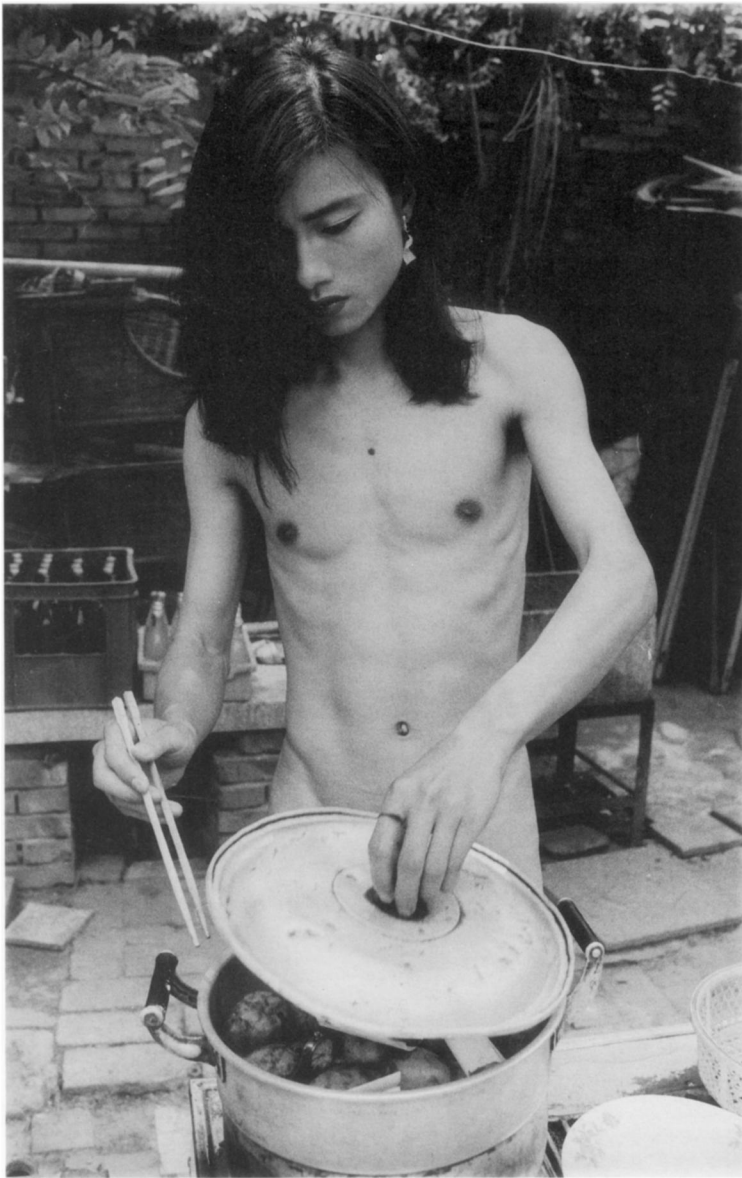
Ma: Yes, more or less. It makes me think more about the vulnerability of human beings in certain circumstances. This idea is expressed in my performance *Fen Ma Liuming and the Fish* of early 1995, shortly after my release. In that work, I put a live fish in a cooking pot full of boiling oil and fried it until it was burnt. The fish appeared to be trembling in the oil, while I was naked and trembling in the freezing open air. I felt strongly at that moment that I was totally vulnerable in the chilly wind, just as the fish is in the hot oil. In my mind and body was an overwhelming feeling of the unreliability of human security and the reality of their exposure to external harm in such difficult circumstances.

Qian: Social and political meanings seem to play an important part in your work.

Ma: Sometimes it's true, but not always. I see my works as a whole. The subjects may vary from one another. They may be more about social issues in some cases or more about sexuality in others, but they are expressed through the very image of Fen Ma Liuming. This is the essential point of my work.

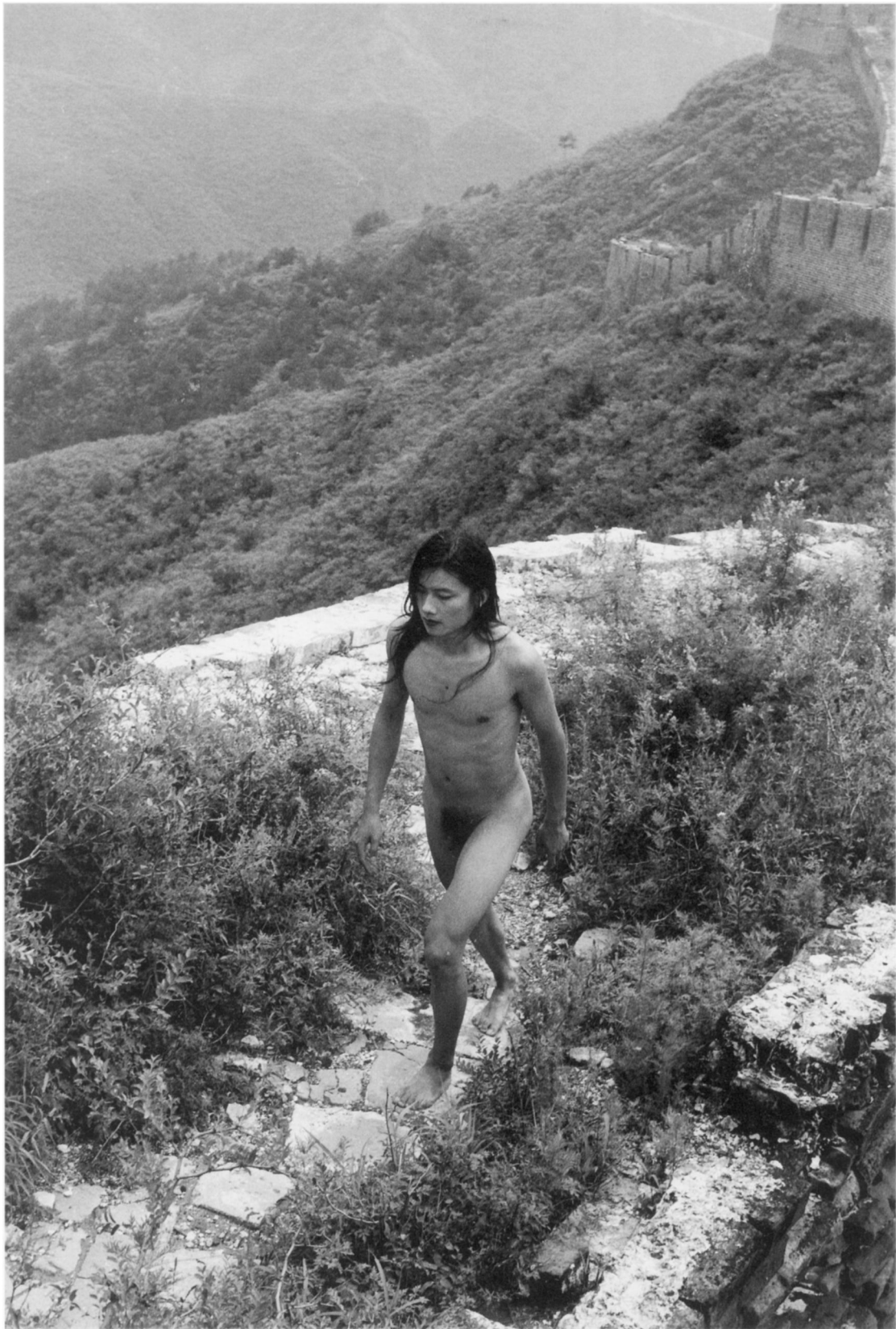
In my performance *Fen Ma Liuming in Tokyo* at NIPAF '96, the focus is more on the visual effects. I was standing on a black wood

box in the center of a stage, facing an audience sitting off-stage. At the beginning, the whole stage was in complete darkness. I struck a match to illuminate first my face, then my body and penis, until the match went out. A few minutes later, the backdrop screen was illuminated by lights. But I was still in darkness, and the audience could only see me as a silhouette. I went on with the same action. Finally, the whole stage was immersed in strong light. I was still striking matches to illuminate every detail of my body. The body and every detail of it is what this work is about. But it is made possible by means of light. The body is



8. Ma Liuming. *Fen Ma Liuming's Lunch II*, 1994. Performance, Beijing. Courtesy the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York. Photo Xin Danwen.

9. Ma Liuming. *Fen Ma Liuming Walking the Great Wall*, 1998. Performance, Beijing. Courtesy the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York. Photo Kristan.



as mystical as the light. There is an old saying in China that the darkest place is also the brightest place and vice versa.

Qian: This potential implication may lead to various interpretations. To an audience who is less knowledgeable about Chinese culture than its politics in the last decades, the interpretation could be politically oriented. As far as I understand your work, there seems to be a cultural dimension in your visual interpretation of sex.

Ma: Exactly. The image of fish is highly related to the issue of sex in Chinese culture. In many cases, fish is a symbol of sex, sometimes even in such activities as fish cooking and fish culture. The image of fish appears several times in my work. Although it can be explained as a social or political metaphor, it is nevertheless related to sex. To me, the issue of sex is related to the maternal body because the sex of man in the maternal body is in the status of complete innocence. This is the main idea in my *Fishchild* of 1996 (fig. 10). In a small bathroom live fishes are hooked and suspended in the air. Among the fishes I am taking a bath. Bathing here is a ritual ceremony that expresses the desire to return to the maternal body. The maternal body is for me heaven.

Qian: Are you talking about the Oedipus complex? Or do you mean the desire to escape from the cruelty and pressure of reality? In other words, the desire to return to the maternal body comes from the consciousness of being vulnerable in the external world.

Ma: You may interpret it that way. But as far as I am concerned, I want to explore a series of questions in various forms. And these questions are raised through the fundamental question of sexual ambiguity. Such an ambiguity is not just visual or physical but more psychological and spiritual. It transcends such issues as social, cultural, and racial differences, just as it transcends space and time. The spiritual universality of sexual ambiguity constitutes the main theme of my more recent works. An example of this idea is my performance for *De-genderism* at the Setagaya Art Museum in Japan in 1997. When I was making myself up in the dressing room, the audience could see the whole process through a monitor installed in the exhibition space. They could hear through loudspeakers the noise as I shaved and dried my hair. After making myself up, I walked into the exhibition space, dressed in woman's clothes beneath a man's suit. I then started to cut the clothes off piece by piece with a pair of scissors until I was completely naked.

In another case, for *Another Long March* in Breda in the summer of 1997, I used the reactions of the audience as an effective part of the performance. The audience members were required to take off their shoes when they entered the gallery. They were very cooperative and had their shoes neatly arranged on the floor. I started to take their shoes pair by pair to the other room of the gallery, where I then sat motionless on a chair, waiting for them to join me and take photographs. After the photographs, I made a path of the shoes and walked along it toward the gate. Very interestingly, the audience helped me to build the path with their shoes whenever the path came to an end. They did it very spontaneously. The interaction between me and the audience seemed to indicate a tacit understanding between them and me.

Qian: The performance you gave at P.S.1 seems somewhat similar to the photographing section of the Breda piece. Why did you drop the other sections?

Ma: All these pieces constitute the whole part of this specific performance series. The main idea is to take photos with the audience. But they vary more or less in details. In the P.S.1 piece, I wanted it to be visually and formally purer and more direct and effective. I also wanted to emphasize more the interaction between me and the audience. The sound of the shutter heard through the loudspeaker was supposed to reinforce the instantaneousness of this presence. The participation of the audience in my performances is crucial to the expression of my idea of sexual ambiguity. The reaction is at the same time the activation of the question of sexual ambiguity.

Qian: This performance has never been realized in China. Do you have any plans to do it there?

Ma: Definitely, if conditions permit. I hope some day soon that I can present it in China, even in a private space. I also hope that I can realize it in different countries, cultures, and nations, whether sexually open or conservative ones, Eastern or Western.

Qian: Although the focus of your performances is more on the universality of sex and sexual ambiguity, nudity is what your art depends on. Nudity may be related in different social, racial, and cultural contexts to issues such as gender, sexual identity, public and private sexual relationships. In the West, in the United States in particular, it is often related to homosexuality, sexual ambiguity, feminism, and other issues. Is your work related to those issues? Or do you think those issues can be interpreted differently in different contexts?

Ma: Nudity is a very sensitive issue in China. It is directly related to morality. Although China has a long history of sex culture, nudity is often related to dirty sexual relationships and is not allowed in such public spaces as museums or art galleries. But things are changing now. The Chinese public is no longer surprised to see nudity in movies. As I said earlier, nudity in my performances is more related to the concept of sexual ambiguity, which is intimately related to my own experience in daily life. As for such issues as homosexuality and feminism, I think they are not central to my work. I would rather pay more attention to the more abstract concept of sex and sexual ambiguity and indistinguishableness. As far as I know, feminism is not a prominent issue in China. It is the government that is more interested in such issues as equality between man and woman. It is very much a politicized issue.

That I am more interested in the indistinguishableness of gender comes from my belief that no clear border may be drawn between man and woman. If one tries to clarify this issue, in the case of my work, that will be a different question. If you say that a figure such as Fen Ma Liuming is both a male and a female, you will come to the conclusion of mutual sex, which is impossible. If you say that he/she is neither male nor female, that simply means he/she has no sex at all. If you talk about sexual transformation, that will be a question related to homosexuality. If you prefer to put more emphasis on the singularity of sex, that will inevitably be related to feminism. I don't engage with these

questions because I believe that such issues can barely be located or identified in my work.

Qian: Yet an art critic from a different social and cultural context may develop his or her own reading and interpretation, or misreading and misinterpretation, of nudity, sex, and identity in your work.

Ma: It's very possible. But I think misreading or misinterpretation itself is very interesting. I hope there would never be a monolithic interpretation of my work. As an artist, I present my work. The audience has the right to understand it differently.

Qian: How do the Chinese art critics and audiences understand your work?

Ma: There isn't much writing about my performances in China. As far as I know, some individuals tend to see the issue of mutual sexuality, while others see the contradictoriness between man and woman. Still others prefer to relate my work to irrelevant issues of sexual pressure. But no one tries to connect my work with the issue of homosexuality. The Chinese audience will only think that a girlish-looking boy is very cute.

Qian: I would like to ask you about the influence of other artists on your work.

Ma: When I was in college in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I read a lot of translations of writings on Western modern and contemporary art. But like the majority of art students in China, I did not have access to the original artworks, because there is no world art collection in China. I could only look at reproductions in books and magazines and slides in class. I like the works of Duchamp, Beuys, and many other artists whose names I can't even remember. It's hard to say how their work influenced mine since I did not have a chance to look at them until the past two years. However, I have been deeply moved by their faithfulness in art and their confidence to create their own way and approach to art. If there is any influence from Western artists, I would say it is on the spiritual level. But I have been influenced by Chinese artists. Believe it or not, I have been deeply impressed, ever since I started to learn to paint, by the Song Dynasty painter Zhang Zeduan's long handscroll *A Scene on the Bian River on the Qingming Festival*. What strikes me the most is his great ability to show an encyclopedic view of the social, cultural, and political life of his time, and his invention of an individual approach to art.

Qian: Nudity and sex are important subjects of many modern and contemporary artists. How do you differentiate your work from theirs?

Ma: They are all great artists. But I have looked at their work in my own way. Sex is the subject of some of Duchamp's works. I see his work as more about the interaction between the sexes. The case is similar with Vito Acconci's work. As for the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, he dresses himself up as a totally female figure and sees himself as a "female" model. The transformation of sexual identity, it seems to me, is the main point of his work. As for myself, I want to address a different aspect, the abstract ambiguity of sex.

Qian: Do you think that when shown in different cultural, political, and social, as well as racial, contexts, for example, in New York, your work may be too easily related by the audience to your identity as Chinese?

Ma: It's likely. But I don't see anything wrong with this. For me, it is a good thing to have the opportunity to show my work to a larger international public.

—October 21, 1998

Qian Zhijian is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He served as editor of *ART Magazine* in Beijing from 1991 to 1997 and writes broadly on contemporary Chinese art.

10. Ma Liuming. *Fishchild*, 1996.
Performance, Beijing. Courtesy the
artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New
York. Photo Rong Rong.

